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Author(s): Phillips Stevens, Jr.
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"New" Legends: Some Perspectives from Anthropology

PHILLIPS STEVENS, JR.

I have been asked to respond to these papers in terms of three broad considerations: 1) whether these "new" or "emergent" stories are genuine legends, constituting a legitimate genre of folklore and therefore worthy of folklorists' investigation and analysis as legends; or whether they are idiosyncratic, fragmentary, aberrant or otherwise anomalous; 2) whether their "truth" or "falsehood" is of any importance to our study and understanding of them and, by extension, to our relations with our subjects; and 3) based on our answers to the first two questions, what, if anything, folklorists ought to do about them—i.e., beyond academia. Some insights from anthropology will be helpful in addressing these questions, and in responding to some of the issues raised in the papers.

As an anthropologist, and Editor of *New York Folklore* for six years (1983–89), I have found that folklorists are well trained in, and very successful at studying *things*, things that can be collected and analyzed for their own content and compared with other similar things, and categorized, and discussed for their significance as things. They have worked hard at refining their methodologies for collecting them, and the results of their efforts have been invaluable to many other disciplines. It has also seemed to me that many folklorists today are not well trained in looking for relationships among things, and that this has often affected their conclusions. I expanded a bit on these sentiments in my farewell remarks and editorial in my last issue of *New York Folklore* (XV, 1–2, 1989). Whether they do or do not matter to

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the job of the folklorist will be discussed in my final section; but they have implications for my discussion of these papers.

A premise of anthropology is that understanding aspects of human behavior and belief requires consideration of their cultural context. A culture (lower case "c") is the totality of symbolic expression—knowledge, behaviors, and artifacts—shared by a group of people who participate in a mutually recognized set of social relationships. Culture (upper case "C") is that unique aspect of the *human* condition which generates symbolic responses to problems of adaptation to the physical and social environment. Legends, as the authors of these papers all recognize, can be expressive of such symbolic responses. If we accept the working definition of legend that Jan Brunvand proposes, "apocryphal, anonymous, supposedly true, plotted story, widely told in different variants over a considerable time period"—disregarding disputes over such terms as "apocryphal," "plotted," or even "story," which have engaged folklorists for a long time—we can clearly see that legend is an artifact of culture at both levels of meaning of the word.

Another working premise for anthropological analysis of a cultural thing is that nothing develops in isolation. Everything has a history, and everything is shaped by certain social and cultural factors that have operated laterally on it throughout its development, and that operate at the time of its observation. We need also to be aware of certain biological bases for the construction of cultural thinking; it is through perception, which is at once a biological and a cultural process that both shapes and is shaped by cultural categories of meaning, that events in the "real" world are given meaning and encoded in a system of *cultural* reality. These and some other premises in anthropological theory are directly pertinent to issues raised in these papers.

Jan Brunvand's "file" of legends provides, in the hands of this master of the "urban legend," insights into the "primordial," nascent processes in the formation of full-fledged legends, and thereby gives us preliminary guidelines for addressing our first question. To say more than this would overstep the limits of my expertise. In his Introduction, Ellis comments on the significance of Brunvand's paper for legend research. I am glad to join his many fans in thanking him for giving us such delightful insights into our own nature; also, to his credit, the nature of the urban legend has reached some popular understanding, and it has framed reasoned assessment of some Satanic scares by some journalists (e.g. Springston 1989).

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Linda Milligan's "Bigfoot" paper and some of the other discussions it cites provide an opening for the application of several of my anthropological premises, to this and the other genres represented in this collection. Papers by Ellis, Jeffrey Victor, and Véronique Campion-Vincent discuss variations on a legend type I have elsewhere (1989b) termed a "demonology," which correlates strongly with certain social factors and has parallels throughout history and around the world. This type has assumed compelling urgency today, and demands some response from folklorists. Amma Davis' discussion of social and psychological functions of narratives about brutal murders are confirmed by the other authors in their own discussions. Rather than discuss individual papers separately, I will make reference to them, where appropriate, under some general themes. I will conclude by suggesting a role for the folklorist. In regard to the incorporation of social science materials by folklorists, my advice will be cautionary; but as concerns the satanic folklore I will insist that its potentially dangerous social implications obligate folklorists to take a public stand.

Anthropomorphic Beasts

For the fullest understanding of the Bigfoot phenomena we need to look into the history and world ethnology of similar ideas, and seek to correlate specific cultural expressions of those ideas with certain social, political, and economic conditions which affect people's cosmological ideas, particularly the nature of their felt relationships with nature. We also need to be aware of the implications of cultural similarities in the cultural construction of this idea, which I will discuss in the next section.

Linda Milligan draws from David Hufford (1977) who cites Bernheimer's (1952) study of the medieval Wild Man; and he and Milligan mention some other manifestations, notably *yeti* and *sasquatch*. But in fact, as Eberhart's (1983) exhaustive listings show, the natural history of the idea of wild humanoids is far more widespread than either knowledge. Similar conceptions have been reported throughout Asia, from the steppes to the forests; Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Australia; and throughout the Americas. Bernheimer, whose work is acknowledged as basic by subsequent writers on Wild Man beliefs (e.g. Dudley and Novak 1972; Husband 1980), shows that the nature of beliefs in wild people changes from fear, to sympathy, to neutrality, and finally to admiration, as people's sense of their relationship with

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nature changes. Images of wild people in Western history, in ancient, medieval, and modern times show just such a correlation. Kenneth Wylie (1980), cited by Milligan, suggests that the modern idea reflects a longing by people for something pristine in nature.

But Milligan reports indications of continuing change in the idea. Bigfoot the Animal might be yielding to Bigfoot the Alien. I have noted elsewhere that "it is not useful to say that history repeats itself; what we can say for sure is that similar social conditions produce similar cultural responses" (1989b:9). Conceptions of the Wild Man in the Middle Ages changed from romantic fascination during the "Age of Chivalry," to fear during the highly turbulent and stressful period from the 14th through the 17th centuries—a period we might call the "Age of Satan." Correlating with the awful conditions and events that generated the great witch hunts, and probably reinforced by intensifying beliefs in werewolves and vampires, the Wild Man became an agent of Satan's *maleficio*, a cannibalistic ogre especially fond of children, succumbing finally to the Renaissance and the "Age of Reason."

Many legends have elaborate historical precedents of which we are too frequently ill-informed. Véronique Campion-Vincent indicates earlier Western and modern Third World parallels to the baby-parts stories but omits details which she assumes "folklorists certainly know thoroughly." In my experience, many don't.

In any case, I hope that Professor Milligan will continue to monitor the popular image of Bigfoot. Given the social conditions and concomitant perceptions of our time, such as are explored by the other four authors, we might expect that "a new form of the legend may be emerging."

But before moving on, there are some other dimensions of the Bigfoot problem with wider implications for us here, and for all folklorists. Based primarily on her reference to one of the many and strenuous efforts of David Hufford to instill in academics a less superior attitude toward folk beliefs, Milligan raises the question: maybe there is something to it? Maybe something like Bigfoot really does exist, and maybe people's reports of such encounters are not "lies," or "delusions," or "irrational" . . . ?

On Cultural "Truth"

Hufford's 1977 *Fabula* article suggests this approach, and there and in a series of *New York Folklore* articles (1982, 1983, 1985) he

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laboriously takes academics to task for operating from a "tradition of disbelief." Maybe so. I. M. Lewis (1989) acknowledges this stance as having framed the initial approach to fieldwork by some anthropologists, who came later to respect their subjects' views *after sharing in their cultural experiences*. This is the key.

We need not make the leap from disbelief to the impossible argument over whether Bigfoot, or The Old Hag, or any other such creature of folklore, is *real*. All students of cultural expression must recognize the critical middle ground: perception. We do not need a technical knowledge, just a general understanding of this bio-cultural process through which neuro-chemical impulses are encoded in the brain and given meaning in the mind by cultural information. We should recognize artificial, and natural, and *social* factors that can affect this process, and hence how one stimulus can be perceived as another; indeed, through some internal short-circuiting, how the mind can assign meaning to a stimulated brain circuitry when there is no external stimulus at all. We should understand that it is not with the eyes, but with the brain/mind that we "see"; and that people sometimes *really do* "see things", and those things are real, and people *know* that they saw them, and they are telling the truth when they report them. And so, if ghosts are a part of one's cultural reality—indeed, if they are even just a vague possibility in one's culture, then a person may record a sensory-stimulated experience as a ghost, and the recording of that experience in culturally prescribed ways is proof for him that he saw a ghost. This process is naturally human. Peter Rojcewicz (1989) has recognized its importance for our understanding of anomalous claims, though he describes it differently. It is more fundamental than Jeffrey Victor's recognition of a predisposition to believe something because of prior experience with the object of the belief, in his mention of the social psychological notion of "perceptual sets." And it is misleading to call it "self-deception," as psychologist Daniel Goleman (1985) has, although he describes the process well in his highly acclaimed book; what he missed is the *cultural source* of the meaning people in stressful situations so desperately seek.

All these considerations, prompting us to stop and ask, "OK, but *what else* is going on?" suggests that to explain increased Bigfoot sightings since the 1940s we should consider not only better communications and the popular impact of *yeti* reports, but also the nuclear age, post-war reconstruction, the Iron Curtain, McCarthyism, Sputnik, etc., not to mention UFOs (see Rojcewicz 1987).

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We have been speaking of "belief." I'd like to suggest that we might re-evaluate this term and consider its weakness; it implies an alternative, even sometimes in our subjects' own usage. *Conviction*, absolute certainty, might often be better.

Without evidence for suspicion of fraud we cannot assume that reports of extraordinary experiences are intentionally deceptive. And we can now, if we must use them, give new meaning to terms like "delusion" or "hallucination." Do we still need to deal with "irrational?" Culture provides people with systems of explanation of events in their social and natural environment. Science and technology provide cultural explanations for some (although, not for as many as establishment policy-makers seem to think!—see my earlier discussion of this: Stevens 1988). For others, causes and effects may be explained in terms of systems of natural "laws" based on principles of logic and reason which often are more detailed, certainly more popularly available, than Western systems. I am thinking specifically of Frazer's principles of sympathetic magic, and of the absence of notions of "chance" or "coincidence" in many non-Western cosmologies. We can, without qualms, honor our commitment "to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor the dignity and privacy of those studied," in the words of the American Folklore Society's Statement on Ethics.

Needless to say, neither an understanding of the history of a legend, nor of the perceptual process, might provide sufficient explanation for certain elements of legend, or of folk or "occult" belief. Milligan's and Hufford's efforts at making sense of Bigfoot raise the applicability of one more piece of anthropological insight, which provides a transition to issues raised in the other papers.

Cognitive Universals?

Most anthropological and other social sciences have long assumed that human cognitive potential is everywhere similar. In 1944, in his seminal paper, "The Logic of African Science and Witchcraft" (note the title, in light of our previous topic), an "appreciation" of Evans-Pritchard's pioneering 1937 study of Zande witchcraft, Max Gluckman said it forthrightly: "Without entering into the arguments for and against, I may say that the consensus of scientific opinion is that there is no proof of any great difference between the brains of various races" (1944:61). And a later anthropologist, Earl Count, in a paper

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drafted in 1951 and published in 1958, asserted that when we find a patterned or institutionalized item of human behavior that is universal, we are justified in looking deeper than the cultural level for an explanation—as some structuralists have done for certain folkloric forms. Anthropology has since assumed a basis for many "cultural universals" in the evolutionary biology of our species. A general working premise has been that cognition (indeed, affection and conation as well) is a neurological activity. Today, the social, behavioral, and neural sciences are discovering more and more direct causal links between behavior, emotion, and the structure and workings of the brain (for our discussion, see Laughlin and d'Aquili 1974; d'Aquili, Laughlin, and McManus 1979). The anatomy and physiology of the human brain is everywhere similar; it is the next logical step to assume that the fundamental processes of cognition, before cultural elaboration, are, too. We should be shocked at de Vries's Victorian statement, published in *Fabula* and quoted by Milligan, regarding "the great similarities in mental processes among children and primitive man."

Probably all cultures tend to anthropomorphize their most affective supernatural agencies; and many creatures and monsters of folklore are cast in our image, too. And, as we have noted, reports of hairy humanoids, whose personalities vary with certain cultural variables, are extremely widespread; indeed, possibly universal.

So, if Hufford is right, that no notion whatsoever of the size and appearance of wild people, or Bigfoot, had ever reached the areas of Newfoundland where some accounts were collected, we can point out the strong indications from the cognitive sciences that people's minds everywhere can create similar humanoid beings. And now we can speculate: Bigfoot *must* be humanoid, and comprehensible; and his personality must reflect something in ours. Bigfoot, *sasquatch*, *yeti*, wild people are for adults what E.T. is for kids; a lost or confused strange/familiar creature (see Clark and Coleman, quoted by Milligan) with sympathetic human-type sentiments, especially of trust. What would happen if white-coated scientists take interest, catch the creature, and subject it to their cold clinical probes? We all felt compassion when E.T. and Iceman were so treated.

Demonologies

Legends constitute cultural information and are available to provide explanation in situations of social anxiety or ambivalence. All the

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discussion in the previous sections is relevant to our understanding of the disturbing "new" legend forms that have taken shape in western Europe and the Americas over the past decade. The satanic and "baby parts" legends are disturbing, to say the least, because their horrible contents trigger deep and powerful emotional responses in people, in many cases seriously disrupting the flow of life in whole communities; and because they can motivate or justify persecutory movements against individuals or groups. I dare say that no form of cultural expression has presented such a challenge to the mettle of folklorists in the entire history of the discipline.

These legends constitute variants on what I have elsewhere (1989b) termed a "demonology":

> an elaborate body of belief about an evil force that is inexorably undermining the society's most cherished values and institutions. The evil it describes may be embodied in and perpetrated by a specific group, a minority which becomes the scapegoat for the people's pent-up frustration. Or the evil force may be a set of ideas, often exaggerated or totally imaginary; an ideology which spreads as if driven by a will of its own, or by a supernatural will. The perceived threat may be given credence as certain deviant individuals or groups are attracted to it as a source of power or enhanced identity, and attempt to act it out. Examples of such persecuted minorities in Western history are the Jews—over and over again; or Bolsheviks; or Japanese-Americans. Examples of the other, the pervasive ideology of evil, include various late medieval heresies, including witchcraft; Communism in the 1950s; and—Satanism today (1989b:1).

In the development of persecutory ("scapegoating") movements throughout history and in stressful social situations around the world, a demonology invariably develops about the targets of the movement. By attesting to the unspeakably evil intentions and acts of the target people, and also by de-humanizing them, the demonology both justifies and gives impetus to the movement. Campion-Vincent sees the baby-parts legend as a modern manifestation of "an immemorial fable," in this case directed specifically at the U.S. and emerging in countries in which horrible allegations about Americans were both credible and politically expedient.

The demonology of the current satanic legends and their variants, however, belong to my latter category—a diffuse ideology of evil whose vague focus may shift rapidly, and they are thereby far more

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difficult for folklorists to deal with. This may be a reason why folklorists have been slow to react to them; but it is possible too, I suppose, that their contents were not recognized as constituting a classic legend form. In any case, the excellent, detailed studies of specific cases published earlier by Ellis (1989a) and by Victor (1989) and their surveys here, should serve as models for more.

To understand the satanic folklore, we need to apply all those anthropological approaches I discussed in the earlier sections of this article, and more. Throughout all the variants, certain "universals" are clear: the evil others kidnap our children, obscenely torment them in horrible rituals, sacrifice them to some higher power by slashing them with knives; dismember them; drink their blood and eat their flesh and vital organs. The ideology says that the blood of preadolescent children is pure and powerful; fortified by it, the conspirators can carry out their larger plan—the subversion of our whole social system. This is the essence of the "plotted story," and variants of it appear frequently in world history and ethnology, always in situations of prolonged, unrelenting and often unexplainable social stress. Bill Ellis (1983) has discussed some manifestations of it, and has noted that certain of its elements have been given motif numbers. It was attributed to Jews before the Christian era by Greeks; by Romans to first century Christians; even by Christians to other sects of Christians (see also Wilken 1984 and Fox 1989). Its attachment by Christians to Jews in the 14th to 17th centuries became very elaborate (Trachtenberg 1943; Hsia 1988). It is not uniquely Western; it has been recorded in Islamized areas, and in all regions of the world by tribal peoples against each other, against colonial governments, even against anthropologists (see Arens 1979). A similar demonology, we should be aware, was partly the justification for the "Final Solution" of Hitler's Third Reich; as, apparently, was another: the "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," the "Jewish World Conspiracy" notion described and traced to its origins by Norman Cohn (1969).

The "Black Mass" with all its anti-Christian trappings, including the blood and flesh of a virgin girl, or an infant, as the Eucharist, and the inverted Cross, was a late coalescing of various elements in the anti-Jewish demonology; Jeffrey Russell (1980) has pin-pointed the origins of this theme to about 1679, under Louis XIV. And all these themes were greatly elaborated and combined with many others of diverse origins, including Druidic ritual, Kabbalah, alchemy, tarot, freemasonry, Renaissance symbolism, by 19th century occultists, most

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notably Aleister Crowley. The folklore of Satanism today is directly heir to these concoctions of the Gilded Age.

Anthropological investigations have shown the elements of child murder, blood-drinking, and cannibalism to be central to demonologies developed by persecutory movements, by oppressed people about their oppressors, even by spiteful neighboring societies, around the world. Explanations for these nearly universal motifs should be sought in the deep symbolic meanings assigned to children, blood, and cannibalism—and the arguments for universal patterns of cognition. Indeed, the themes of child murder and cannibalism are the stuff of the most dreaded cultural nightmares. In African and Asian conceptualizations, cannibalism is closely related to incest, universally tabooed. We might profit by examining a psychoanalytic similarity between "eating" and sexual relations, as Sagan (1974:74ff.) suggested.

We can easily see a correlation between the baby-parts stories and the forms of satanic legends which stress the kidnapping and murder of children, and infant mortality or fears of child disappearances. In Third World areas of chronically high infant mortality there have always been a variety of supernatural or demonological explanations. In the U.S., in the 1970s and early 1980s, widespread concerns about mysterious child kidnappings developed out of a smaller number of actual cases of run-away (and "throw-away") children which were intensified by the media, milk distributors, etc. But investigations of contemporary satanic legends and correlations of their elements with aspects of social psychology, are only just beginning. Can we link these scares to the sorts of millennial apocalyptic fears that goaded people in the later Middle Ages? Many of our social concerns seem disturbingly similar. . . . We may hope for detailed social science analyses in the near future.

Victor's sociological overview, especially if combined with his detailed analysis of the 1988 Jamestown, NY, rumor-panic (1989), ought to spur further research. His discussion of historical background, and of variant forms and contributing factors, is vital to our fuller understanding of the processes of legend formation. And his attention to the communication network that spreads and vitalizes elements of the legend is useful. All investigators of this genre need to be aware of the history of the legend, of sociological factors that contribute to the legend's credibility, and also of elements of satanic folklore firmly emplanted in our popular culture. No serious investigator should

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express wonder, even rhetorically as some of the satan-hunters do in implicit support of their claims of a subversive, even supernaturally-driven conspiracy, that the stories arise "seemingly independently, over such a broad region."

Bill Ellis' careful yet lively study is also exemplary. His functional interpretation, the idea of "therapeutic magic," is paralleled for a different genre by Amma Davis: the satanic legends identify, focus, and give some tangible meaning to otherwise diffuse and hence intolerably disconcerting anxiety. By "naming" a thing one indeed can exercise some "magical" control over it. This observation is a valid interpretation of the meaning of naming throughout the anthropological literature, and it may constitute one of the most important functions of legends as well, as Ellis suggested elsewhere (1989b:37).

"Anything is possible nowadays," a person in Switzerland told Véronique Campion-Vincent. Why? We must ask. Jeffrey Victor says, "Something strange is going on in America, for which history gives us no exact parallels." History will never give us "exact parallels," but we can note some very disturbing similarities between actual and perceived events and trends in the U.S. today, and ones which in the later Middle Ages contributed to the Inquisition. Neither correlations nor social functions demonstrate cause, we are warned by social scientists, but they are indicators of directions for our research.

What to Do?

As editor of *New York Folklore* I attended many folkloric functions, and I was impressed by the success of "applied" or "public sector" folklorists in various endeavors. These successes, and my own experiences with public agencies and the media in recent years, convince me that academic folklorists can and should play a role in the public sector.

For reasons indicated in the papers in this volume, legends—a familiar subject to folklorists—have become increasingly important today. They may be benign, as—so far—the Bigfoot stories are; they may be socially disruptive, as the satanic legends are. I recently suggested some ways in which folklorists and others could de-fuse satanic fears, in schools, to police and civic groups, and to the media (Stevens 1989b). Many such groups and agencies are very concerned, and very confused, about the satanism problem, and they are eager to hear reasoned analyses of what is going on. The demonstration that these

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are legends, with parallels elsewhere, is very reassuring, as I know from recent experience. Moreover, because of their unique expertise in this area, folklorists should feel *obliged* to present themselves to the public.

But how much should they try to *explain*?

In the beginning of this paper I said that folklorists have demonstrated a unique capability in the study of "things," and legend is one such thing. Through their methodology and their comparative study, folklorists have been able to identify the standardized themes and the metaphoric levels of meaning that make a story a legend, and that enable it to appear at different points in time and space, with locally adapted details but with the themes still intact, to respond to similar needs. In the accounts presented here we can see that the Bigfoot, baby-parts, and satanic-conspiracy stories constitute the stuff of true legends; Brunvand's collection suggests incipient legends; Davis' valuable discussion, while not of true legends, indicates social and psychological functions that legends share with other narrative forms. This level of explication may represent the best contribution folklorists can make to popular audiences when some calming influence might seem called for, as in the satanic scares. Simply to show that these stories and rumors are legends, by dipping into their vast repertory and drawing out similar stories that have appeared in similar conditions in different times and places, may be the most effective job they can do, as Jan Brunvand's popular books have demonstrated.

Folklorists have investigated and recorded and categorized and sought to preserve areas of human expression in which neither anthropologists nor other social scientists have been very interested, and they have provided an incredible wealth of material from which anthropologists and others have been able to draw. Too often they have neglected the social/cultural context of their data, and by the time it is available for use by others it has been stripped bare of any specific cultural associations. But should folklorists try to be social scientists?

The observations on folklore with which I began this essay were foreshadowed in 1971 by Bruce Jackson:

> . . . among the greatest problems are defining species and dealing with categories and the way your perception of categories controls the kind of data you admit, and the kind you can see, and the kind you choose to garbage. Analyses, based on collections like that, are analyses of categories and relationships. But they are *not* analyses of causes or meanings. Analysis of stuff collected in a taxonomic way can *never* be more than descriptive (1971:15).

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These two sets of observations, nearly 20 years apart, indicate that, in general, the directions and methods of folklorists haven't changed; indeed, as I indicated elsewhere (1989a), it has seemed to me that the focus of folklorists has *narrowed*, become more specialized, since Jackson made his remarks.

So let's square up to it. Folklorists should continue doing what they do best, because others *want* what they do, and no others can do it as well. In that same article, Jackson said, "I have come to think that folklore work independent of cultural referents is ultimately of terribly limited value . . ." (1971:17). And I agree, but just how much cultural data should folklorists feel obliged to collect, and still retain the integrity of their focus? I cannot say to folklorists, "Don't try to explain it," for that is to deny a central aim of scholarship. But I think that folklorists ought to be more careful in recognizing the limits of their capability to explain. I think that it should be sufficient for them to *recognize* historical, perceptual, social and cultural factors which might be operating on their data, and that this recognition will enable them to formulate more and better questions; but they should not necessarily be expected to answer those questions themselves.

I have long argued that the increasing fragmentation of the disciplines is expensive in time and resources, and is detrimental to the advancement of knowledge, because it encourages duplication of efforts. We need closer cooperation among and better communication between the disciplines; but each discipline should recognize and build upon its own strengths, and recognize the limits of its expertise. Each researcher should develop a sense of the *systemic* or *paradigmatic* nature of any investigation of any aspect of the human condition, and have a general understanding of the capabilities and research directions of other disciplines engaged in related investigations, so he or she can know where to direct the questions.

One final thought. In 1988 Alan Jabbour, expressing presidential optimism, told the American Folklore Society that folklorists "have survived, even prevailed, not despite our distinctive traditions but because of our continuing allegiance to them" (1989:297). His optimism will be borne out only if folklorists, as Sue Samuelson suggested earlier (1983), 1) develop greater confidence in their expertise, and 2) work more actively to convince the other disciplines, and the public, of the value of their work.

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